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WASHINGTON - After a 15-year fight, gay rights' groups believe 2010 will be the year they persuade Congress to pass a landmark law protecting workers from being fired or denied jobs or promotions because of their sexual orientation.

With Democrats in the majority in the House and Senate and President Barack Obama promising to sign the bill, this is the best chance supporters have ever had to see passage of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, first introduced in 1994, said Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

"I think it's particularly poignant that this comes at a time when the nation is facing such a crisis in unemployment," Carey said. "Each day that a job is lost because of prejudice compounds the problem."

Opponents fear the bill could pave the way for the legalization of gay marriage and create workplace discrimination against people whose religious beliefs denounce homosexuality.

After delays last year that frustrated gay rights' leaders, the lead sponsors of the bill say they expect a vote in the House in the first quarter of this year.

But others believe Congress may be afraid to pass the law in an election year.

"I do think the Democratic leadership is committed to acting on this bill, but whether they can pass it is another question," said Peter Sprigg, senior fellow for policy studies at the conservative Family Research Council, which opposes the bill. "I think there is a reluctance on the part of some of the more moderate Democrats to tackle a controversial issue like this."

The legislation before Congress would make it illegal to fire, refuse to hire or refuse to promote an employee based on a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. The gender identity provision seeks to protect transgender people, whom gay rights' advocates say often face the worst discrimination.

The proposed law would not apply to the military or to religious organizations such as churches and parochial schools. It also would exempt small businesses with fewer than 15 employees. The legislation does not require employers to provide domestic partner benefits to the same-sex partners of their workers.

Unlike gay marriage, which a majority of Americans oppose, most people support efforts to bar workplace discrimination, public opinion polls show. Support for gays having equal rights in job opportunities has jumped from 56 percent in 1978 to nearly 90 percent today, according to the nonpartisan Gallup polling firm.

Opponents say that's because Americans don't really understand the implications of the bill. "There is a lot of controversy about how broadly the religious exemption would extend," Sprigg said. "It's pretty clear it would not require churches to hire a gay pastor if they don't want to. But it could force a Christian book store owner or the owner of a Christian publishing company to hire gays even if they have moral objections to that."

Supporters of the anti-discrimination law say opponents are making wild claims to try to confuse people about what's really in the bill.

"This is about employment discrimination and nothing more," Carey said. "People see this as an issue of fairness and, in this economic climate, an issue of survival."

Arizona Rep. Harry Mitchell, a moderate Democrat in a swing district, voted for the bill in 2007 and is co-sponsoring this version. He said it is needed because there are 29 states where employees can still be fired because of their sexual orientation. Discrimination against transgender people is legal in 38 states, according to the Human Rights Campaign.

Meanwhile, 87 percent of Fortune 500 companies have adopted policies barring discrimination based on sexual orientation.

"The business community gets it," Mitchell said. "Why would you want to exclude anybody who is industrious, smart, and who can do the job? That's just crazy."